

Methodism Moves into Central Pennsylvania

by Raymond Martin Bell, 1991

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Methodism moved into central Pennsylvania in the 1770's. Philip Gatch took it into York County in 1772; Robert Strawbridge took it to Huntingdon County in 1774. The first circuit was [Little] York, set up in 1781. The earliest church building was Rock Chapel in Adams County.

The earliest organized circuits in Central Pennsylvania were as follows.¹

- 1781 – [Little] York, formed from Baltimore Circuit by Freeborn Garrettson
- 1784 – Juniata (lasted only two years), formed from [Little] York Circuit
- 1787 – Bath (½ in Maryland, ½ in Pennsylvania), formed from Allegheny Circuit
- 1788 – Huntingdon, formed from Bath Circuit by Robert Ayres
- 1791 – Northumberland, formed from [Little] York Circuit by Richard Parrott

Francis Asbury did not arrive in America until 1771. He found a large number of Methodists in the Frederick-Baltimore area of Maryland. These were “children” of Robert Strawbridge, a Methodist from Ireland. Strawbridge, a local preacher, had built a church about 1764 and had made many converts.

The Methodist system, as devised by John Wesley, was based on classes and circuits. Half a dozen persons could band together into a *class*, which met weekly under a class leader. This was an occasion for spiritual growth and was the foundation of Methodism. When there were several classes in an area, a *circuit* was set up and a preacher appointed. In America, a circuit was typically two-weeks (12 preaching points) with one preacher, four-weeks (24 preaching points) with two preachers, or six weeks (36 preaching points) with three preachers. Each appointment received preaching every two weeks. Circuit riders preached daily, mainly at homes, with one day a week for rest. There were few church buildings. By 1792 there is record² of only six Methodist church buildings in central Pennsylvania: Rock Chapel, York, Three Springs, Shippensburg, Northumberland, and Carlisle.

Until Francis Asbury became a bishop in 1784, he was considered John Wesley's American assistant. He organized the circuits, generally about a dozen at a time, into districts; later the districts were organized into conferences. Without Asbury, Methodism would have grown very slowly. He provided strong leadership, used flexibility in arranging circuits, counted on strong lay support, and organized and planned well. Generally he assigned two preachers to work together on a circuit – one experienced, one new – which provided for on the job clergy training. As Asbury set up new circuits, Methodism expanded like waves from a stone dropped in a pond.

Asbury re-assigned the preachers every year. Early Methodist preachers were young and single, and circuit-riding was so strenuous that they did not preach many years. The story of a lonely circuit-rider striking out to find persons is hardly true. Each new circuit was pre-planned by Asbury. It was set up a year before by a preacher from an established circuit, and each appointee to a new circuit was handed a plan. The word METHODISM was apt.

In general, new classes were formed as individual Methodists motivated to share their faith moved into central Pennsylvania from the south and the east. The names of these class leaders have been preserved.³

1780 – Henry Moore, from Hunterdon County NJ to Juniata County

1783 – Thomas Lakin, from Montgomery County MD to Bedford County

1784 – Thomas Green, from Baltimore MD to Huntingdon County

1785 – Jeremiah Duvall, from Annapolis MD to Bedford County

1787 – Henry Benn, from New Castle County DE to Centre County

1787 – Philip Antes, from Montgomery County PA to Centre County

1788 – Peter Gray, from Hagerstown MD to Centre County

In addition, a few prominent early class leaders became Methodists after moving into central Pennsylvania. Such is the case for Michael Cryder, whom research shows did not become a Methodist at Huntingdon until about 1788. Robert Ayres does not mention Cryder in his journal.

Methodism in York County

Methodism began in York County in 1772. Philip Gatch (1751-1835), who was from near Baltimore, tells in his autobiography of establishing a small circuit of three preaching places. One of these was in Pennsylvania, near New Freedom. He wrote:⁴

I was directed by the Providence of GOD into the State of Pennsylvania, where I held my first public meeting. I applied to John Lawson for the privilege of holding meeting in his house. He refused me the privilege. A man in the neighborhood heard I was in the settlement

and appointed the meeting for me on Sunday in his own house. This was in 1772. We visited two more places.

Gatch says that he continued to preach at these places for a year, and that in 1775 he was surprised to find that John Lawson's had become a preaching point on Baltimore Circuit.

The journal of John Littlejohn⁵ for 1777-78 for Baltimore Circuit lists John Lawson's as a regular preaching point on Thursdays, but it took eight weeks to make one round trip. The preacher was at Fallston on Sunday, Lawson's on Thursday, and Hereford the next Sunday. Littlejohn wrote:

July 17, 1777 – preached to about 20 hearers from Isaiah 3:10-11; met a small class.

September 11, 1777 – preached at Brother Lawson's from Isaiah 33:38; met the class and we were quickened.

November 6, 1777 – preached at Brother Lawson's from I Thessalonians 5.

August 27, 1778 – preached at John Lawson's from Matthew 21:23; called for the class papers & found since April last some had met only 2,3,7,8,9 times; gave them a class paper & faithful warning.

John Lawson lived in Shrewsbury Township, near New Freedom. His preaching point became Low's Meeting House, then on Harford Circuit. Here later was Low's Camp Ground and Summit Grove Camp Meeting. Bishop E.R. Hendrix was converted at this campground.⁶ Bishop Asbury preached at John Low's August 18, 1812.⁷

Rock Chapel

The first Methodist meeting house erected in central Pennsylvania was Rock Chapel, near Heidlersburg, Tyrone Township, Adams County. The first record of it is July 24, 1784, when Francis Asbury preached there.⁸ When Freeborn Garrettson set up [Little] York Circuit in January 1781, he made no mention of Rock Chapel – and there is no record of a church being built on a Methodist circuit before a regular preacher was assigned. Asbury did not mention it when visiting the circuit in 1781, 1782 or 1783.

Robert Ayres⁹ tells of a Quarterly Meeting Sunday, May 22, 1785, at Rock Chapel. Rock Chapel is named by Robert R. Roberts¹⁰ in 1802, by Nathaniel B. Mills¹¹ in 1810, and Robert Boyd¹² in 1816. Mills wrote:

December 20, 1810 – preached at Rock Chapel, a new preaching house, and there has been a good congregation.

Early Methodist churches were called "preaching houses" in the Baltimore area. Mills's Thursday preaching at Rock Chapel was followed by a Saturday visit to York Springs and a Tuesday appearance at East Berlin.

Mills' language suggests that the first building must have been renovated in 1810. In 1849 the church was rebuilt – and the cornerstone reading 1773, certainly in error, may have been set then. When W.W. Carhart¹³ spoke about Rock Chapel in 1887 at the “114th anniversary”, he had to depend on tradition – which after 100 years was somewhat uncertain. The name Swisher associated by tradition with Rock Chapel may be the Anthony Switzer who was taxed in Tyrone Township, then York County, in 1779.¹⁴ Note also that Philip Gatch preached near Lawson's, which is only 25 miles from Rock Chapel, in 1772 and that Rock Chapel is only 30 miles from Robert Strawbridge's 1760's home in Maryland. It is hoped that further research will help determine the exact date of the erection of Rock Chapel.

Robert Strawbridge in Huntingdon County

Robert Strawbridge, pioneer Methodist preacher in the Frederick-Baltimore area, organized Methodist classes in Huntingdon County about 1774. He and other Marylanders were attracted to the southern part of the county. Strawbridge owned 183 acres near Waterfall, now Clay Township, Huntingdon County – which was earlier Dublin Township, Bedford County. After his death in 1781, his oldest sons Robert and George warranted¹⁵ the land February 2, 1787. It was surveyed March 21, 1787, and patented August 3, 1796. Rent was charged from March 1, 1775. Since all land rents began on March 1, this indicates that Robert Strawbridge made an improvement between March 1, 1773, and March 1, 1775. Robert or “widow” were taxed as non-residents from 1779 to 1807.¹⁶

It is interesting to note that conference minutes show that Robert Strawbridge had appointments in 1773 and 1775, but not in 1774. Presbyterian missionary Philip Vickers Fithian,¹⁷ wrote at Shirleysburg August 27, 1775, “There is a Methodist Society, but no stated minister.” Five days later at Bath, Virginia, now Berkley Springs, West Virginia, he wrote, “At some distance, and within hearing, a Methodist preacher was haranguing the people.” This was surely Robert Strawbridge, as Asbury did not get to Bath until 1776.

Robert Ayres¹⁸ in June 1788, when organizing Huntingdon Circuit, found “old members” near Shirleysburg and near Cassville. In 1790 a church was built near Three Springs. The Huntingdon County Strawbridge property is 39 miles (on a direct route) from Bath, 6 miles from Three Springs, 12 miles from Cassville, and 15 miles from Shirleysburg. This is a lost chapter in the life of Robert Strawbridge, who did so much for early Methodism.

Henry Moore in Juniata County

One of the pioneer Methodists in central Pennsylvania was Henry Moore, who likely came from New Jersey about 1780 and settled in Fermanagh Township, now Juniata County, near Mifflintown. He was first taxed in 1781.¹⁹ It was likely he who was responsible for the formation of Juniata Circuit in 1784, when forty members were reported.²⁰ After two years the name Juniata disappears and the classes become part of [Little] York Circuit. For several years in the 1790's, Moore's appointment was served by Northumberland Circuit preachers, but the distances were too great.

The first mention of preaching at Moore's is by Robert Ayres,²¹ who preached there from Hebrews 2:3 on Saturday, May 14, 1785, at 2 pm. This must have been one of Ayres first sermons, for he did not join the conference until a month later. Sunday there was a love feast, and at noon John Paup preached and Ayres exhorted.

On May 25, 1792, Northumberland circuit-rider William Colbert²² wrote that he "got into my circuit at Henry Moore's near Juniata." On June 3 he "preached at Henry Moore's Meeting House," and on July 1 he "preached at the Meeting House near Moore's."

Bishop Francis Asbury²³ likely preached at Moore's June 26, 1793. The meeting house referred to by the above journalists is assumed to have been the Associate Presbyterian hewed-log church built in May 1792²⁴ on the land of James Boner and available to all denominations. When Henry Moore died in 1796,²⁵ a center of Methodism disappeared. Another Juniata Circuit with forty members reported was formed from Carlisle Circuit in 1804, but Methodism grew slowly in this Presbyterian country.

Appointments 1781-92
(from the General Minutes)

	<u>LITTLE YORK</u>			
1781	Philip Cox (90 members)			
1782	Nelson Reed John Major			
1783	William Gill (156)			
1784	Michael Ellis (50)			<u>JUNIATA</u>
1785	John Cooper			Simon Pile (40)
				James Riffin
1786	Matthew Greentree (136)			
1787	David Combs*	<u>BATH</u>		
		Robert Ayres		
		Michael Leard	<u>HUNTINGDON</u>	
1788	John Hill (138)	James Wilson	Samuel Breeze	
		John Rowan (319)	Daniel Combs* (59)	
1789	Jonathan Forrest (151)	George Hagerty	Michael Leard	
		Joshua Wells (434)	Thomas Workman (189)	
1790	Michael Leard	Robert Green	John Rowen	
	Richard Parrott (195)	Thomas Bell (364)	(194)	<u>NORTH- UMBERLAND</u>
1791	George Browning	Michael Leard	Charles Burgoon	Richard Parrott
		John Simmons (356)	(201)	Lewis Browning
1792	Samuel Rudder	Rezin Simpson	John Simmons	James Campbell
	Charles Cook (205)	William Nichols (361)	(217)	William Colbert (250)

For fifteen of the above preachers, this was a first appointment. Of all the above preachers, only twelve were still preaching in 1800; the average pastoral service of the others was six years.

*See the APPENDIX for more information on David and Daniel Combs.

End Notes

- ¹ General Minutes.
- ² "Methodist Circuits in Central Pennsylvania Before 1812" by Raymond Martin Bell and Charles F. Berkheimer.
- ³ "Methodist Circuits in Central Pennsylvania Before 1812" by Raymond Martin Bell and Charles F. Berkheimer.
- ⁴ Gatch Papers, Ohio Methodist Seminary, Delaware OH.
- ⁵ Littlejohn Journal, Louisville Conference Historical Society [copy at Upper Room, Nashville TN].
- ⁶ Charles Berkheimer notes, from the NY Christian Advocate.
- ⁷ Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury Vol II, page 706. Nashville TN, 1958.
- ⁸ Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury Vol I, page 463. Nashville TN, 1958.
- ⁹ Ayres Journal, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh PA.
- ¹⁰ Roberts Manuscript, DePauw University, Greencastle IN [or Library of Congress].
- ¹¹ Mills Journal, Lovely Lane Museum, Baltimore MD.
- ¹² Boyd Sermon Book, Methodist Archives, Allegheny College, Meadville PA.
- ¹³ "Historical Address Delivered at the 114th Anniversary of Old Rock Chapel" by W.W. Carhart, Central Pennsylvania Conference Archives, Lycoming College, Williamsport PA.
- ¹⁴ Pennsylvania Archives III, 21, 44.
- ¹⁵ Division of Land Records, Harrisburg PA
- ¹⁶ Tax Records of Bedford and Huntingdon Counties.
- ¹⁷ Philip Vickers Fithian: Journal 1775-76. Princeton NJ, 1934.
- ¹⁸ Ayres Journal, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh PA.
- ¹⁹ Pennsylvania Archives III, 20, 514.
- ²⁰ General Minutes.
- ²¹ Ayres Journal, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh PA.
- ²² Colbert Journal, Garrett-Evangelical Seminary, Evanston IL.
- ²³ Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury Vol I, page 761. Nashville TN, 1958.
- ²⁴ History of the Susquehanna & Juniata Valleys. Philadelphia PA, 1886.
- ²⁵ Mifflin County Estate Records.